

Singapore, Literature and Identity

Peter Wicks

Introduction

Ever since Singapore was abruptly ejected from the Federation of Malaysia in August, 1965, the leaders of the island state have been quick to offer metaphors and slogans as to its identity. Terms such as a "rugged society", the "regional hub", an "electronic entrepot for East Asia", "the Boston of the East", even "a city where dreams can be met" come readily to mind. Such pithy terms have a point. From a problem-plagued port and immigrant frontier just over a generation ago, Singapore's status as the world's premier city-state is hard-earned but assured. It is the purpose of this paper, however, to consider definitions of Singapore other than those offered by the governing elite, and specifically those offered by Singapore's burgeoning literary community. It is, of course, acknowledged that the State provides a decisive role in the formulation of all public policy in contemporary Singapore, and further that creative writing in Singapore is subject to a very significant amount of self-censorship (by both authors and publishers), within the "OB" (out of

bounds) criteria established by the State. Nevertheless, it is also assumed for the purpose of this analysis that there is a degree of civil society in contemporary Singapore, i.e. there is some space between State and society, in this case for creative authors, and that several prominent creative writers do give voice to issues of civil society in that country.

Origins of Modern Singapore

Singapore's official passion for self-definition partly has something to do with the improbable nature of Singapore itself. Could this former British colony, naval base, and commercial entrepot possibly be, or become, a nation? With just 620 square kilometres, some of it newly reclaimed from sea and swamp — the island itself being so small, and, snug up against the base of the Malay Peninsula — Singapore seemed integral to Malaysia in spatial and geographical terms. Moreover, after internal self-government was obtained in 1959, the leadership of Singapore's governing People's Action party had taken so adamant a position that even the concept of a sovereign

island state was hilarious in the modern world, and that Singapore's future lay in a union with proximate territories to the north and east. Many Singaporeans had been born and educated in towns on the Malay Peninsula, continued to have close familial ties there, and spoke English and Malay languages rather than Mandarin or a Chinese dialect. Straits-born Singaporean Chinese leader, Lee Kuan Yew, was the most vocal and idealistic exponent of the advantages of union with the peninsula. It was Lee who, by delicate political manoeuvres and effective electioneering, silenced dissident voices, and carried Singapore into Malaysia in 1963. It was also Lee who, at the height of Indonesia's bizarre "Confrontation" with Malaysia, set off on lengthy and exhaustive tours of Africa and the Pacific, seeking support for Malaysia's right to survive as a nation. In economic terms, Singapore would be the New York of a United States of Malaysia, or nothing.

But Singapore was not destined to be the New York of anything. Instead, on ethnic and personal grounds, it lasted as part of Malaysia for less than two years. Though it had a substantial and sizeable Chinese minority, Malaysia was defined in ethnic Malay terms, led by conservative aristocratic Muslim Malays, and committed to a gradualist programme of nation-building that involved government attempts to improve the circumstances of its rural Malay base. By contrast, Singapore was urban, bustling, and mostly Chinese. The essential cultural styles of the two places were incompatible. Malaysia was measured and relaxed, Singapore intense and aggressive. The amiable, urbane, patrician Malaysian Prime Minister of the 1960s, Tunku Abdul

Rahman, found to his dismay that he had scant in common with Lee, the brilliant, brash, articulate, and mercurial Singaporean, even though they were both graduates of great British universities and both like to play golf. Singapore's behaviour in Malaysia challenged, then, broke Malay rules. A sombre Tunku told the Malaysian Federal Parliament on 9th August, 1965, that there could only be one Prime Minister for the nation, "so the best course we can take is to allow Lee Kuan Yew to be the Prime Minister of an Independent Singapore".¹ So Singapore had independence thrust upon it, and Lee Kuan Yew wept publicly on television for the first and last time. But the survival of Singapore against formidable odds quickly became an obsession of the People's Action Party under the banner of a "rugged society".

In their quest for national survival and distinctive identity, Singapore's leaders have defined their state in various ways. Allowing for nuances of audience and location, they formulated the definitions by focusing on the island's small size, limited natural resources, precarious location, similarities to Switzerland and Venice, commitment to meritocracy, economic development, material success, multi-racialism and cosmopolitanism (though not, significantly, hybridity).

Literary Perceptions

By contrast, Singaporean authors have taken more reflective and evaluative approaches to the vexed question of Singaporean identity. A brief overview of some well-known authors helps establish some key contributing elements to a

definition of Singaporean identity that is both dynamic and inclusive, viz.:

a) Singapore is not China.

Singapore's second Prime Minister since independence, Goh Chok Tong, recently reminisced with a visiting American journalist that, during the 1950s, "China was the future".² In 1984, a young English Literature graduate from the National University of Singapore named Ovidia Yu explored just that sentiment in a story, "A Dream of China," which subsequently won *Asiaweek* magazine's Annual Short Story Competition. The female narrator is Singaporean Chinese. She has a father, a good and devoted man, who, as he grows older, talks more and more about China, the land of his birth more than half a century ago and which he recalls as "the most beautiful of beautiful lands."³ Impressed by these reminiscences, his daughter comes to share the dream, which she finds at first much more interesting than what she calls the "mundane life" in Singapore, where "the closest thing to magic was the haunted cubicle in the primary school toilet."⁴ Drawn to "a China I had never known," she is fascinated by this old man who plants orchids, drinks tiger bone wine, practices calligraphy, and writes poems about exile. However, her father's relationship with China turns out to be neither simple nor straightforward, and illusions are swiftly shattered. Back in 1946, the father had chosen to remain in his secure job in Singapore rather than return to participate in China's postwar transformation, for as he realised, "Singapore was not China."⁵ Indeed, when the daughter herself took up an opportunity to visit China first-hand as an

interpreter, she discovered a beautiful and timeless but essentially alien land which had "nothing to say to my spirit."⁶ In China, she found herself, instead, dreaming of Singapore, a "a diamond city of trees and meaningful occupation, efficiently sparkling in the modern world."⁷ A younger brother to the father, who had gone back to China in 1946, and who the father had idolised from afar, is revealed, in fact, to be poor and mendicant, seedy and greedy, full of curses, complaints, and self-pity, and in no way the prototype of a new socialist utopia. Whatever the dream of China for Singaporeans may have been during the 1950s, there was no such fantasy for at least one educated young Singaporean Chinese in 1984.

b) Singapore's identity is essentially hybrid.

The distinguished neurosurgeon, Gopal Baratham (b. 1935), is from Singapore's minority Tamil-Indian community. He has now published four volumes of fiction, as well as contributions to anthologies, and received the Southeast Asia WRITE award in 1991. During the 1980s, he brought out two collections of short stories, *Fragments of Experience* (1982) and *People Make You Cry and Other Stories* (1988), set primarily and often humorously amongst the Tamils of Singapore and Malaysia. In fact, stories like "Welcome" and "Wedding Night" are truly uproarious. Then in 1991 came two controversial novels, indicating that Baratham was prepared to range well beyond his communal roots. An essentially political fable of conspiracy and intrigue, *A Candle or the Sun*, was published outside Singapore by a British firm, Serpent's Tail. It attracted considerable public comment.

However, *Sayang*, a poignant portrait of sweet-bitter passion, was more experimental and engaging in terms of topic and design. Outwardly, *Sayang* is a rather prurient, sensational account of sexual athleticism, extramarital promiscuity, and drug abuse that leads inexorably to the terminal illness of AIDS. Incongruously, though, *Sayang* involves a cross-cultural exploration of the Christian incarnation within a Southeast Asian context. The main characters are named Joseph and Ri (short for Marie). Their only, precious son, Kris, was conceived inadvertently but explicably whilst his mother was technically a virgin (Baratham draws on his depth of medical know-how here), and dies as a young man, tragically before his prime. For Gopal Baratham, the concept of "*Sayang*" means that love, like life itself, is transitory and finite.

Baratham is prepared to utilise the "local patois," Singlish, as Ri lapses on occasion into phrases like "Yah, lah", when she wants to annoy her husband, a former English teacher. Like the younger Philip Jeyaretnam (b. 1964), Baratham is well able to portray Singapore's restricted residential environment with its omnipresent, rather uniform, and outwardly anonymous HDB flats. The character, Joseph Samy, also a Tamil, notes at one point that so much of the country has been "overrun by high-rise buildings and the things that come with them."⁸ Nevertheless, Joseph is in no doubt that Singapore is the jewel of Southeast Asia, "the centre of the world... our clean, well-run city."⁹ A striking contrast to disorganised, drug-infested regional neighbours. Faced with the prospect of retrieving his intoxicated son from inland Sumatra, Joseph is quite definite.

I am nervous of travelling and having all that I need on the island, do as little of it as possible...True, I found the people of Southeast Asia beautiful and gentle but I preferred to enjoy them at a distance or after they had been sanitised in Singapore."¹⁰

The underlying theme of the novel is, however, hybridity of religion, culture, and people. To this formidable admixture, coherence comes from a basically successful marriage between a 61-year-old man of Indian descent and his former pupil who is ethnically Chinese, and at least two decades younger. It is clear that the existence of the hybrid encourages Gopal Baratham as author. Singapore may remain, as Baratham says, a market place, but is also a place where interesting, exciting things can happen in human relationships, and where unanticipated love can matter, if only for a few moments.

This cultural hybridity of Singapore is likewise emphasised in a wonderful 1991 short story entitled "A History of Tea," by Simon Tay, lawyer and politician. This narrative of Singapore's maritime trading past is replete with the Eurasian characters of a single Anglo-Chinese family:

I lift the lid and they are all in the pot: Grandfather Chang, Beverly's Grandfather Jones, Grandmother Tee, my mother's mother, our parents, our aunts and uncles, the Tees and Tehs we barely recognise at Chinese New Year gatherings, the Rajendrans, Beverly's English Jewish boyfriend I have never met...¹¹

c) Singapore is experiencing a significant generational and social change.

In *Sayang*, Joseph Samy often expresses an inability to comprehend a younger coterie of Singaporeans:

When I was a young man my aims were clear. I wanted to be a teacher and when I left school I joined a teacher-training college, graduated from this, then got a job in school. Things are not the same with the present generation.¹²

Presumably he meant the kind of bored, restless, cosmopolitan youngsters who populate the pages of *Fascist Rock: Stories of Rebellion* (1990), Claire Tham's first published collection of short stories. Brilliant, opinionated, and unconventional, Claire Tham (b. 1967) has a knack to capture the mood and manners of twenty-year-olds with given names like Patsy, Chris, Alphonsus, James, Jeanne, and Irwin, who typically inhabit cars, arcades, and condominiums, and who convey sentiments about as deep as an alcoholic drink, a half-smoked cigarette, a pop song, or an evening drive past grey ghostly HDB flats. The title is about the only ambiguity in this book. It could refer to a place, to music, or to an attitude, or all three. For the characters in the story, "Baby, You Can Drive My Car," life is brittle, hedonist, narcissistic, escapist, and "a fake magazine existence."¹³ The past is dead, and a friend's death brings merely a futile shrug of the shoulder. Says the story's female narrator:

I want to have a good time. I'm sick of being like everybody else. I hate school I want to die young. That's about all.¹⁴

Tham's terse, spare prose sears up out of each story as her characters express their frustration at life on an island "no larger than a peanut,"¹⁵ and at conformist practices like university initiations. Even a classic Chinese immigrant success story can go sour when, in "Homecoming", a Singaporean university student returns from London to confront the solitary loneliness of a recently-deceased father, who "did nothing but stay in his flat all day, re-reading the papers and waiting for the day his son would come home."¹⁶

Older Singaporeans are allowed some say in Tham's literary vision. In the story just called "Lee", it is left to a Singaporean Chinese father to explain briefly to his Americanised, street-wise daughter that any former colony full of comparatively recent immigrants has to try doubly hard to matter and to be respected in a competitive world. On a car ride through downtown Singapore, Lee almost conceded the point:

I thought it was going to be like Indonesia," she remarked. "This looks like parts of downtown LA. Glitzy."¹⁷

Acquiescence is possible, even in a "milieu of work and pragmatism."¹⁸ As the story "Pawns" vividly shows, the Lion City is more than preferable to a Celestial Middle Kingdom that can silence its best and brightest at Tiananmen Square.

Saving the Rainforest and other stories (1993), Claire Tham's second collection, continues a literary exploration of particular kinds of non-conformity amongst an outwardly successful, materially preoccupied, formerly immigrant community. As the pick of the collection,

"The Forerunner", shows, Tham has a remarkable capacity clearly to delineate a deterioration in human relationships, as between wife and husband, parent and child, or one generation and another. There are no prim Confucian success stories here, no manuals on successful leadership, no slogans for social improvement. Instead, Tham's acute intelligence probes the human parameters of convention. Thus, an older Chinese woman forms an intense, futile, romantic relationship with a younger, illegitimate Eurasian male, thereby providing the actual, subtle, unexpected theme of the title-story "Saving the Rainforest." "Sundrift" traces the short-lived marriage between a starry-eyed young Singaporean Indian woman and an American expatriate whom she never really gets to know. A fleeting physical liaison between two men of very different ages occurs in "Deep Sea Sloth," resulting in the end of the older one's career. The suicide of a naked, drug-ridden teenager in "The Foreunner" effectively conveys the terminal state of his parents' marriage. In all, the seven stories in this volume offer sombre comment on another side to the Singaporean story. Claire Tham's characters are truly Lee Kuan Yew's nightmare.

d) Singapore's identity is still evolving.

Ah Leong is one of the more familiar and popular personalities in recent Singaporean fiction. His presence permeates the first of three prose works by Philip Jeyaretnam entitled *First Loves*, which was published in 1987, and stayed on the best-seller list for eighteen months. Notably, Ah Leong is also a Chinese character created by a Eurasian author. Jeyaretnam's abiding literary

concerns can best be summarised as the quest for maturity and identity, both at individual and national levels. Jeyaretnam practices law in Singapore, but he had also been writing for publication for at least a decade, and as he told *Asiaweek* in 1990:

I always felt that I was going to be a writer of books...I had a respect, an admiration for words. I was taken by the idea of a world of ideas that could be communicated through books.¹⁹

Although Jeyaretnam has also brought out two novels, *Raffles Place Ragtime* in 1988, and *Abraham's Promise* in 1994, it is Ah Leong and his adolescent escapades in *First Loves* which best capture the author's perception of his country.

As readers first encounter this wide-eyed young flat-dweller, he is over-awed by the physical shape and size of his environment. "Ah Leong", it is said, "stood at the window and looked out, trying to fix all Singapore in his gaze. He could not actually see much."²⁰ In fact, the word "concrete" occurs four times on the first page of *First Loves* alone. But although Ah Leong may feel a little hemmed in, there is plenty to keep him occupied. As story follows story, he absorbs the embraces and suffers the shackles of family; he survives sibling rivalry with his brother (as well as a momentous bowel upset from green mangoes), he learns from his father's earthy wisdom, he manipulates his male friends, he falls in and out of relationships with women, he loses an office job when he day-dreams, and he is eventually absorbed into National Service, an obligation upon all young Singaporean males. It is a lively, sometimes

hilarious and salacious romp, with plenty of telling phrases not all of which are entirely plausible. For one so young, Ah Leong has some remarkably advanced and improbable opinions about life and society. For example, he questions his fellow soccer-players: "What's going on? You guys look more dead than the average session of Parliament."²¹ Certainly, Ah Leong reveals a sophisticated grasp of political theory and cultural traditions. Then, there are the rather explicit, interwoven, erotic interludes of Ah Leong's Indian friend, Rajiv, which consciously transcend ethnic boundaries, and raise crucial questions about relations between Singapore's majority and minority groups. Thus Rajiv thinks that his parents:

live as if under siege. They have ceded control over public life, over political decisions, to others, to Chinese people. We are outsiders they say. Never rock the boat or we will be the ones thrown off. So respect the will of the majority.²²

The multi-racial ideology of Philip Jeyaretnam's Singapore clearly has its limitations. Politics in particular is seen as essentially a Chinese preserve. For all that, Ah Leong is an infectiously optimistic, good-natured sort of fellow who "had soaked in his country, and now he felt hope that there was more to his city than the effervescence of consumption."²³ At the end of the book, Ah Leong is even said to have a new vision for his country, though any such vision is hinted at rather than spelt out, and is grounded in the aspirations and experiences of the ordinary folk. Philip Jeyaretnam thus shares with the doyenne of Singaporean letters, Catherine Lim, a long-held view that Singapore culture cannot emerge simply by official decree or public campaigns, but that old people, school children, taxi drivers, and even story tellers may have a better idea.²⁴

Notes:

- ¹ "Singapore Breakaway": Full text of speech by Tunku Abdul Rahman, House of Representatives, Malaysia, 9 August, 1965, Department of Information, Malaysia.
- ² Cited in Sesser, S. *The Lands of Charm and Cruelty: Travels in Southeast Asia*. New York: Vintage, 1994, P. 16.
- ³ Yu, Ovidia. "A Dream of China," *The Fiction of Singapore*, ed. Edwin Thumboo. Singapore: Unipress, 1993, P. 1154.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1155.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1161.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Baratham, Gopal. *Sayang*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1990, p. 20.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*

- ¹¹ Tay, Simon. *Stand Alone*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991, p. 150.
- ¹² Baratham, *Sayang*, p. 24.
- ¹³ Tham, Claire. *Fascist Rock: Store of Rebellion*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1990, p. 5.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ¹⁹ "Siding with the Underdog," *Asiaweek*, 21-28 December, 1990, p. 33.
- ²⁰ Jeyaretnam, Philip. *First Loves*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1987, p.7.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- ²⁴ cf. Wicks, Peter. "Catherine Lim's Singapore." *Asian Studies Review*. 16, 2 (1992), pp. 157-170.